



Increasing Student Engagement and Motivation: From Time-on-Task to Homework

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NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

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FOREWORD

This booklet is the 14th in a series of "hot topic" reports produced by the Northwest Regional

Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains a discussion of research and literature pertinent to the issue, a sampling of how Northwest schools are addressing the issue, suggestions for adapting these ideas to schools, selected references, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet gives practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success in certain areas. The goal of the series is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

Other titles in the series include:

- *Service Learning in the Northwest Region*
- *Tutoring: Strategies for Successful Learning*
- *Scheduling Alternatives: Options for Student Success*
- *Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?*
- *Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students at Risk*
- *All Students Learning: Making It Happen in Your School*
- *High-Quality Professional Development: An Essential Component of Successful Schools*
- *Student Mentoring*
- *Peaceful Schools*
- *After-School Programs: Good for Kids, Good for Communities*
- *Parent Partners: Using Parents to Enhance Education*
- *When Students Don't Succeed: Shedding Light on Grade Retention*
- *Making Positive Connections With Homeschoolers*

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INTRODUCTION

High motivation and engagement in learning have consistently been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of student success (Blank, 1997; Dev, 1997; Kushman, 2000; Woods, 1995). Yet, keeping students interested in school and motivating them to succeed are challenges that present themselves year after year to even the most seasoned teachers. In fact, numerous studies have shown that student engagement in school drops considerably as students get older (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). By the time students reach middle school, lack of interest in schoolwork becomes increasingly apparent in more and more students, and by high school, as dropout rates attest, too many students are not sufficiently motivated to succeed in school (Lumsden, 1994).

There are many factors that contribute to students' interest and level of engagement in learning, and teachers have little control over many of those factors (Lumsden, 1994). However, research has shown that teachers can influence student motivation; that certain practices do work to increase time spent on task; and that there are ways to make assigned work more engaging and more effective for students at all levels (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Dev, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1991). By focusing on both in-school activities and homework, this booklet offers some practical strategies for

promoting student engagement in learning. When possible, we have included suggestions for both teachers and administrators, describing techniques that can be incorporated at the classroom, school, and district levels. Also included are tips to share with parents, who play the most important role in cultivating students' motivation to learn.

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IN CONTEXT

There are myriad reasons that students become less engaged in learning as they grow older, including influences from both within and outside the school. As Lumsden (1994) notes, the earliest influences on children's motivation to learn are parents and others in the home. When students enter school, their level of interest and desire to engage in learning are also heavily influenced by teachers, administrators, the school environment, and their classmates (Lumsden, 1994). Although it may sometimes seem that teachers have no control over students' attitudes about learning, researchers confirm that they do (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). "To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn," notes Stipek (as cited in Lumsden, 1994, p. 2).

Developmental factors and students' perceptions about their own abilities also play into their level of engagement in learning. The older students get, the less likely they are to take risks and engage themselves fully in activities at which they are not sure they will succeed. According to Lumsden (1994), "although young children tend to maintain high expectations for success even in the face of repeated failure, older students do not" (p. 2). To older students, "failure following high effort appears to carry more negative implications -- especially for their self-concept of ability -- than failure that results from minimal or no effort" (Lumsden, 1994, p. 2). Students' attitudes about their capabilities and their interpretation of success and failure further affect their willingness to engage themselves in learning (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). For example, students who understand poor performance as a lack of attainable skills, rather than as some innate personal deficiency, are more likely to re-engage themselves in a task and try again. Students whose self-concept is bound up in their history of failure, on the other hand, are less likely to be motivated to learn.

Mac Iver and Reuman (1994) add that middle school and high school-age students' level of engagement in school is also highly influenced by peers. As students grow older, their motivation to engage in learning may be influenced by their social group just as much as, if not more than it is by teachers, parents, and other adults. While peer influences can be either positive or negative, it is not uncommon for older students to discourage one another from actively participating in school (Mac Iver & Reuman, 1994).

Whether the decrease in student engagement is the result of unmotivated students or of school practices that fail to sufficiently interest and engage all learners, an ample body of research suggests that the situation can be changed (Brooks, Freiburger, & Grotheer, 1998; Dev, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1991).

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MOTIVATION: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

In general terms, student motivation "refers to a student's willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process" (Bomia et al., 1997, p. 1). Skinner and Belmont (1991) develop the definition further, noting that students who are motivated to engage in school "select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest" (p. 3). Less motivated or disengaged students, on the other hand, "are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges" (Skinner & Belmont, 1991, p. 4).

Student motivation is often divided into two categories:

- *Extrinsic motivation*: A student can be described as extrinsically motivated when he or she engages in learning "purely for the sake of attaining a reward or for avoiding some punishment" (Dev, 1997). School practices that seek to motivate students extrinsically include publicly recognizing students for academic achievements; giving out stickers, candy, and other rewards; and taking away privileges, such as recess, on the basis of students' academic performance (Brooks et al., 1998).
- *Intrinsic motivation*: A student can be described as intrinsically motivated when he or she is motivated from within: Intrinsically motivated students actively engage themselves in learning out of curiosity, interest, or enjoyment, or in order to achieve their own intellectual and personal goals. According to Dev, 1997, "A student who is intrinsically motivated . . . will not need any type of reward or incentive to initiate or complete a task. This type of student is more likely to complete the chosen task and be excited by the challenging nature of an activity" (p. 13).

While any kind of motivation seems preferable to none, there is compelling evidence that students who are more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated fare better (Brooks et al., 1998; Lumsden, 1994). In fact, some research demonstrates that using extrinsic motivators to engage students in learning can both lower achievement and negatively affect student motivation (Dev, 1997; Lumsden, 1994). Students who are motivated to complete a task only to avoid consequences or to earn a certain grade rarely exert more than the minimum effort necessary to meet their goal. And, when students are focused on comparing themselves with their classmates, rather than on mastering skills at their own rate, they are more easily discouraged and their intrinsic motivation to learn may actually decrease. Brooks et al. (1998) observe that while external rewards sustain productivity, they "decrease interest in the task, thereby diminishing the likelihood that the task will be continued in the future" (p. 26).

Students who are intrinsically motivated, on the other hand, come out ahead in a number of areas.

Intrinsically motivated students:

- Earn higher grades and achievement test scores, on average, than extrinsically-motivated students (Dev, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1991)
- Are better personally adjusted to school (Skinner & Belmont, 1991)
- Employ "strategies that demand more effort and that enable them to process information more

deeply" (Lumsden, 1994, p. 2)

- Are more likely to feel confident about their ability to learn new material (Dev, 1997)
- Use "more logical information-gathering and decision-making strategies" than do extrinsically-motivated students (Lumsden, 1994, p. 2)
- Are more likely to engage in "tasks that are moderately challenging, whereas extrinsically oriented students gravitate toward tasks that are low in degree of difficulty" (Lumsden, 1994, p. 2)
- Are more likely to persist with and complete assigned tasks (Dev, 1997)
- Retain information and concepts longer, and are less likely to need remedial courses and review (Dev, 1997)
- Are more likely to be lifelong learners, continuing to educate themselves outside the formal school setting long after external motivators such as grades and diplomas are removed (Kohn, 1993)

It should be noted here that some researchers object to describing student motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Sternberg and Lubart (as cited in Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995) for example, argue that this division is too simple to reflect the many complex and interrelated factors that influence students' motivation to succeed in school. They point out that most successful people are motivated by both internal and external factors, and suggest that educators build on *both* types when working to engage students more fully in school.

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STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING MOTIVATION

Ample research has demonstrated that school practices can and do affect a student's level of motivation (Lumsden, 1994). Skinner and Belmont (1991) caution, however, that this may not always be for the better:

If left to run their typical course, teachers tend to magnify children's initial levels of motivation. This is fine for students who enter the classroom motivationally "rich"; they will "get rich." However, for students whose motivation is low, their typical classroom experiences may result in its further deterioration (p. 31).

To be sure, efforts to promote student motivation need not be directed solely at students who have low levels of motivation. All students (and all schools, for that matter) would benefit from higher levels of engagement and motivation to succeed (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Lumsden, 1994). Following are suggestions for both teachers and administrators seeking to increase students' motivation to learn:

At the classroom level:

- Use extrinsic rewards sparingly. If extrinsic motivators are to be used, they are most effective when rewards are closely related to the task accomplished. Also, rewards should only be given when they are clearly deserved. Giving a prize for minimally successful work sends the

message that minimum effort is acceptable, and the reward then becomes meaningless (Brooks et al., 1998).

- Ensure that classroom expectations for performance and behavior are clear and consistent (Skinner & Belmont, 1991). Help students understand the criteria for individual assignments by giving them examples of high-, average-, and low-level work and then providing an opportunity to discuss how each piece was evaluated (Strong et al., 1995).
- Make students feel welcome and supported (Lumsden, 1994). Elementary school students in particular need to feel that teachers are involved in their lives. Take time to get to know students, talk to them individually, and "express enjoyment in [your] interactions" (Skinner & Belmont, 1991).
- Respond positively to student questions, and praise students verbally for work well done (Dev, 1997).
- Work to build quality relationships with students, especially those considered to be at-risk and without other positive adult interaction; this is a critical factor of student engagement that allows children to foster a sense of connection with school (McCombs & Pope, 1994).
- Break large tasks into a series of smaller goals (Lumsden, 1994). Doing so prevents students from becoming overwhelmed and discouraged by lengthy projects.
- Promote mastery learning (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). "When a student completes an assignment that does not meet the expected criteria, give her or him one or more opportunities to tackle the task again, with guidelines on how to achieve the desired result" (Dev, 1997, p. 17).
- Evaluate student work as soon as possible after project completion, and be sure that feedback is clear and constructive (Strong et al., 1995).
- Evaluate students based on the task, not in comparison to other students (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Dev, 1997; Lumsden, 1994).

At the school and district levels:

- Make increasing student motivation a priority in school reform and restructuring efforts (Renchler, 1992; Skinner & Belmont, 1991).
- Create a school culture that emphasizes the importance of academic achievement. Design schoolwide symbols to show students that learning is valuable and that the entire staff is invested in students' success (Renchler, 1992).
- Model and communicate the value of lifelong learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Renchler, 1992).
- Develop a school climate that recognizes individual differences, encourages creativity, and gives both teachers and students a sense of autonomy. Particularly important is allowing students and teachers to have some degree of control over teaching and learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).
- Support teachers' efforts to increase student motivation, encouraging student-centered learning and outcomes-based instruction (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Renchler, 1992). Additionally, recognize teachers' individual learning needs and be supportive of their continuing education and involvement in research (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).
- Provide and participate in professional development activities that deal with motivation, effective use of homework, and student engagement (Renchler, 1992).
- Finally, develop ways to involve parents (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Discuss the issue of motivation with parents, involve them in the school's efforts to increase student engagement, and "give them guidance in fostering [motivation] in their children" (Renchler, 1992).

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MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN CLASS ACTIVITIES

It only makes sense that the more interesting an assignment is, the more likely students are to immerse themselves in the task and stick with it through completion. Even highly motivated students need schoolwork that actively engages them by building on their interests and prior knowledge. But what makes a task more interesting? What causes a student to be more engaged by one project than another? How can teachers design work that will keep students' attention at the same time it draws them more deeply into the process of learning?

Research tells us that the teachers who are most successful in engaging students develop activities with students' basic psychological and intellectual needs in mind (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Strong et al., 1995). In general, students need work that develops their sense of competency, allows them to develop connections with others, gives them some degree of autonomy, and provides opportunities for originality and self-expression (Anderman & Midgely, 1998; Strong et al., 1995). The challenge teachers face, then, is to create a learning environment that attends to all or most of these needs.

Following is a list of suggestions for designing more engaging in-class activities and increasing the amount of time students spend on task.

1. *Ensure course materials relate to students' lives and highlight ways learning can be applied in real-life situations* (Lumsden, 1994; Skinner & Belmont, 1991). Schoolwork should be meaningful to students outside the school building, as well as within. Students are more engaged in activities when they can build on prior knowledge and draw clear connections between what they are learning and the world they live in. They also need to feel that "school work is significant, valuable, and worthy of their efforts" (Policy Studies Associates, 1995).
2. *Allow students to have some degree of control over learning* (Brooks et al., 1998). This can be done in any number of ways, from giving students choices between different assignments, to minimizing adult supervision over group projects, to letting students monitor and evaluate their own progress (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Dev, 1997; Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Anderman & Midgely (1998) note that this doesn't mean teachers must relinquish control of the classroom: "Even small opportunities for choice, such as whether to work with a partner or independently" (p. 3) give students a greater sense of autonomy.
3. *Assign challenging but achievable tasks for all students, including at-risk, remedial, and learning disabled students.* Tasks that seem impossible easily discourage learners, as do those tasks that are rote and repetitive (Dev, 1997; Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Remedial programs that limit students to repetitive basic skills activities actually "prompt students' lack of engagement in their schoolwork and frequently result in limited achievement" (Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Students need to feel successful and that they've earned success.
4. *Arouse students' curiosity about the topic being studied.* Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) suggest using the "mystery" approach, in which students are presented with fragmentary or contradictory information about a subject and are then asked to examine available evidence to develop their own hypotheses. This kind of activity also builds on students' needs for competence and autonomy, giving students an opportunity to direct inquiry and "discover for themselves."

5. *Design projects that allow students to share new knowledge with others.* Strong, Silver & Robinson (1995) observe that when students do assignments that only the teacher will read, they are entering into a nonreciprocal relationship. More often than not, the teacher already knows and has no real need for the information the student is providing him or her. Projects are more engaging when students share what they are learning in reciprocal relationships, as in collaborative projects where each student's knowledge is needed by others in the group to complete an assignment.

It is also important to note that, in addition to instructional practice, certain elements of the classroom environment, such as seating arrangements and student behavior, will influence how long students remain on task and engaged in their work. Bonus and Riordan (1998) suggest teachers consider the goals of individual activities when determining how to arrange seats in the classroom. In their research into on-task behavior in second- and third-grade classrooms, they found that students remained engaged in learning longer when desks were arranged appropriately for the task at hand: U-shaped arrangements for class discussions, rows for test taking, etc. (Bonus & Riordan, 1998).

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF HOMEWORK

Much of what has been said about making in-class work more engaging can also be said of homework: out-of-class assignments should have a clear purpose, should be relevant to students' lives, and should be at the same time challenging and manageable (Black, 1996). Homework carries with it some added complications, though. Not only does successfully engaging in homework depend a great deal on students' home environment, but homework experiences may also have a significant impact on students' long-term attitudes toward school (Corno, 1996; Paulu, 1998).

In recent years there has been much debate about the value of homework. While some parents and educators firmly believe that assigning homework is an important part of school, others call the practice into question. Some critics of homework observe that not all students go home to a quiet and supportive study environment, and thus have little chance of being successful with out-of-school assignments (Lenard, 1997). Still others point out that homework may contribute significantly to students' negative attitudes toward school, particularly if it is a source of conflict between students and parents, or is linked to punishment and other consequences at school (Black, 1996; Corno, 1996).

Proponents of homework, on the other hand, argue that homework serves a number of purposes and can benefit students when used appropriately. The main purposes generally associated with homework are as follows:

- To give students a chance to "review and practice what they have learned" (Paulu, 1998)
- To prepare students for the next day's lesson (Paulu, 1998)
- To provide opportunities to identify and learn to use resources, such as the library, the Internet, reference books, and other community resources (Paulu, 1998)
- To allow for more in-depth exploration of topics than is possible during class time (Paulu, 1998)

- To help students develop time management, study, and organizational skills (Black, 1996; Paulu, 1998)

As might be expected, the effectiveness of different types of homework varies according to students' age and ability level. Cooper's study (as cited in Black, 1996) found that homework raises achievement "substantially" for high school students, but only about half that for students in the middle grades. Cooper found no effect on academic achievement for students in grades 1-6 (Black, 1996). This is not to say that homework doesn't benefit younger students in different ways. Other studies have found that homework is most useful for elementary school students when it focuses on developing study habits and organizational skills (Butler, 1987; Paulu, 1998).

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

The first step in maximizing the effectiveness of homework is determining the appropriate amount of work to assign. More time, the research tells us, doesn't necessarily lead to higher achievement (Black, 1996; Corno, 1996; Paulu, 1998). In *Helping Your Students with Homework*, a guide for teachers sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education, Paulu (1998) establishes the following guidelines for how long students should spend on homework each night:

- Grades 1-3: no more than 20 minutes per night
- Grades 4-6: 20 to 40 minutes per night
- Grades 7-9: no more than 2 hours per night
- Grades 10-12: 1 ¹/₂ to 2 ¹/₂ hours per night

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Once you have established a reasonable length of time for students to spend on homework, consider the following list of "best practices" for making homework a more engaging and ultimately more positive learning experience for students.

1. *Expectations.* At the beginning of the school year, communicate your expectations for homework to both students and parents (Patton, 1994; Paulu, 1998). Which days do you collect homework? What are the penalties for late or incomplete homework? How can parents and students reach you if there is a problem?
2. *Consistency.* Be as consistent as possible throughout the school year (Paulu, 1998). Getting students accustomed to a regular homework pattern early in the year is helpful to all students, but may be especially important for students with learning disabilities (Patton, 1994).
3. *Purpose.* Make sure the purpose of homework assignments is clear to students (Paulu, 1998). Students and parents alike are less likely to become frustrated when they understand the value and the objectives of an assignment (Black, 1996).
4. *Time.* Don't underestimate the length of time it will take for students to complete assignments (Black, 1996). Include time for gathering supplies and organizing materials in your calculation of how long your students will take to complete an assignment.
5. *Explain.* Take time to explain instructions to students, and give them an opportunity to ask questions before the end of class (Black, 1996). When possible, give students time to get started on homework assignments in class, so you can be sure they understand what they are being asked to do (Patton, 1994).
6. *Variety.* Provide a variety of homework assignments throughout the school year to prevent

homework from becoming boring or monotonous (Patton, 1994; Paulu, 1998).

7. *Coordinate*. Make an effort to coordinate with other teachers, so students aren't overwhelmed with long assignments for several classes all on one night (Patton, 1994; Paulu, 1998).
8. *Evaluate*. Finally, evaluate homework assignments and give students feedback on their work. When assignments are just checked off as completed, students perceive them as meaningless, which leads to frustration and low-quality work (Butler, 1987; Lenard, 1997; Patton, 1994).

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DEVELOPING A HOMEWORK POLICY

If your school does not already have a homework policy in place, you might discuss this with other teachers and administrators. Homework policies, which function to define a standard set of expectations for and beliefs about homework, can be shared and reviewed with students, parents, and teachers at the beginning of each school year. At minimum, homework policies should define the role of homework in learning at each grade level, and the specific responsibilities of teachers, parents, and students (see Butler, 1987).

While some educators caution that school and districtwide policies for homework can become restrictive (Black, 1996), there are advantages to having a shared understanding of how homework is being used to support learning. Homework policies not only help define parents' role in homework, but also ensure that students and parents are informed about teachers' expectations. Another benefit of homework policies is that they allow teachers to develop a consistent, schoolwide set of expectations for students, which is particularly helpful for students who have several different teachers throughout the day. Developing a homework policy is also a good way for educators to get together, review the research, and explore how homework can best be used to promote achievement and engagement in school.

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GETTING PARENTS INVOLVED IN HOMEWORK

Active parent involvement has been associated with numerous benefits for students, including increasing student motivation and engagement in school. When it comes to homework, though, parent involvement can take many different shapes, not all of which have a positive impact on learning. When working to increase student engagement and motivation, it is important to include parents and discuss ways they can support their children's learning both at school and at home (Patton, 1994; Paulu, 1998).

First, it is important that parents understand what role teachers expect them to play, especially in terms of homework (Gaillard, 1994; Paulu, 1998). What one parent views as helping out, a teacher might perceive as interference or cheating. And what a teacher might take for granted that parents can do—such as signing off on homework or checking spelling words—a parent may not have the skills or the time to follow through on. Clearly, it is important to communicate with parents about how to

best help children learn. It is also necessary for educators to be sure their expectations are realistic, given parents' skills and schedules (Paulu, 1998).

It is equally important to be clear with parents about what kinds of involvement are actually beneficial to students. Studies have shown that parents who offer rewards for grades, or who punish students for poor performance, may actually decrease students' motivation to do well (Dev, 1997; Patton, 1994). Fear of punishment, anxiety about meeting parents' expectations, and worrying about being compared to siblings not only cause stress for students, but can also detract from their intrinsic motivation and interest in learning (Dev, 1997). This is not to say that parents shouldn't be invested in how their children are doing in school. Rather, it suggests that there are more productive ways for them to be involved and show their interest in students' progress.

To help children be successful with work at home and at school, parents can:

- Create a place at home that is conducive to studying (Patton, 1994; Paulu, 1998). Good study environments are well-lit and quiet. Although every child's learning style is different, most educators agree that students do best when the television is off and the student is free from distractions (Gaillard, 1994; Paulu, 1998).
- Set aside a specific time for homework each day (Paulu, 1998). This might involve limiting television-watching or phone calls until homework is finished (Gaillard, 1994). Parents should be careful, though, not to pit homework against activities students enjoy, or to create situations in which students rush through their work in order to get back to other activities (Black, 1996). Paulu (1998) notes that family routines -- which include set homework times -- have been linked to higher student achievement.
- Make sure students have all the supplies they need (Paulu, 1998). Parents should check in with students ahead of time about the kinds of projects they will be doing: It might be tough to find a calculator or a report cover at 9:00 the night before an assignment is due.
- Be available if students have questions. Parents can support their children by looking over homework and giving suggestions, but should not do the homework for them (Paulu, 1998).
- Make an effort to communicate regularly with teachers (Corno, 1996). If necessary, parents should ask teachers to clarify their expectations. It is also a good idea to find out ahead of time what kinds of resources -- such as tutors or services for second language students -- are available to students if they need help.
- Avoid linking rewards or punishment to school performance (Dev, 1997). While it is important for parents to recognize students' achievements, they should avoid external motivators for performance. Instead, parents should emphasize the value of learning and show they appreciate their child's hard work (Patton, 1994).

For a more in-depth discussion of parent involvement as a general topic, see the March 1999 issue of *By Request, Parent Partners: Using Parents to Enhance Education* <<http://www.nwrel.org/request/march99/index.html>>.

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CONCLUSION

While the link between engagement and achievement may seem obvious, this issue frequently slips

through the cracks in discussions about school reform and improvement. As schools focus on helping all students achieve high standards, however, reaching out to disengaged and discouraged learners becomes increasingly important. Clearly, students who are not motivated to engage in learning are unlikely to succeed.

Educators can and do affect students' level of engagement in learning. Simply recognizing this power is a critical step in motivating students. By further recognizing how a healthy self-esteem is the foundation for success, which in turn fosters motivation and engagement in school, teachers can see the connections between their practice and student outcomes.

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THE NORTHWEST SAMPLER

The following pages contain descriptions of three school systems that have made notable efforts in engaging students. These Northwest programs represent some of the promising strategies being implemented in schools around the nation. These educators -- some purposefully, some subconsciously -- have incorporated many of the strategies discussed in this booklet. Though each has a unique approach, all share common themes, such as community, consistent discipline, and student-centered learning to motivate students day after day. Included for each location is contact information, a description of the program, observed outcomes as a result of the program, and tips directly from these educators to others looking to implement similar efforts.

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LOCATION

Amity Creek Magnet School
437 NW Wall Street
Bend, OR 97701

CONTACT

Gary Bruner, Principal
Phone: 541/383-6195
Fax: 541/383-6199
Web Site: <http://www.bend.k12.or.us/gbruner/amity>

DESCRIPTION

Walking into Amity Creek Magnet School is much like walking into any school. Faint smells of school lunch waft through the air, children's artwork is proudly displayed on the walls, and the sound of learning fills the hall. There are classrooms, an office, and a principal mingling with students and teachers. Beyond these things, however, Amity Creek is much different than typical schools. This is a school of choice, not only because it is a magnet school, which by definition means it's a school of *choice*, but because choice is the foundation of the educational philosophy held by every educator in

the school.

Bend's first magnet school, Amity Creek opened its doors in 1995 to 121 students. Since that time the school has grown to 155 students. This school was the dream of several veteran Bend teachers who longed to do school a little differently. While Amity Creek meets the same academic requirements as all elementary schools in the district, and while some of its features and underlying concepts are common in other classrooms, it is a fundamentally different kind of school that is organized around a child-initiated approach to learning.

It is based on the understanding that each child is uniquely gifted, that children construct their own knowledge, and that learning is a natural, continuous, social process that results from a child's engagement with the world. The primary function of the staff is to facilitate and nurture this learning process by responding to the individual needs and interests of each child. Children are allowed the freedom and support they need to do the exploring, interacting, creating, communicating, questioning, and independent thinking that are all so essential to a quality education.

Amity's vision statement reads:

"Amity Creek Magnet School is rooted in the concept of community -- a community of learners encompassing students, families and staff. We are centered around a child-initiated approach to learning and committed to the progress of all members."

This child-initiated approach is based on the following assumptions:

- Each child is uniquely gifted
- Each child is at a unique stage of development
- Each child learns and develops in unique ways
- Children construct their own knowledge
- Learning is a natural, ongoing social process that results from a child's engagement with the world
- Learning is motivated by a child's interest and need to know
- Learning is cyclical -- continually repeated, reshaped, expanded, and reorganized by new experiences
- Learning involves wondering, dreaming, playing, interacting, communicating, exploring, discovering, questioning, investigating, creating, and risk-taking

Evidence of these assumptions is everywhere in the school: Where curriculum doesn't guide instruction, kids do. Amity Creek aims to create an environment for children that is safe and comfortable for learning and growing. This environment is rooted in the concept of the school as a non-hierarchic community, in which children, family, and staff are all included as equally valued and respected members. Each day begins with a school community time that staff and visitors attend that helps reaffirm this sense of community. The community concept fosters social responsibility and self-discipline within each child. It also promotes group decisionmaking and democratic values.

The school environment is designed to promote problem solving, learner independence, and flexible interaction. The primary function of the staff is to facilitate the natural learning process by responding to the individual needs and interests of each child. A balance is sought between independence and guidance. Being able to observe individual students and implement relevant instruction accordingly is an important component of each teacher's role. This skill allows them to

continually reshape their instruction based on learner need, as does each teacher's specialization in developmental education. The staff is committed to ongoing personal growth as well as professional development. They collaborate as a team throughout each day in order to exchange information, ideas, and insights that help them plan for, adjust to, and meet the changing needs of the community. The staff also share their ideas, what they read, and what they are excited about with the children and parents. In sharing what they learn with the community, the staff demonstrate that learning is an important and fulfilling lifelong process.

Teachers use varied instructional strategies depending on the developmental stages and needs of each child. Children's ideas, interests, play, and words are taken seriously. Teachers respond in ways that seek to stimulate further thought and imagination. They help students make connections between ideas and disciplines. Information is presented in a multisensory environment emphasizing process-learning. In a multisensory environment, a student has ample opportunity to feel comfortable pursuing interests in a variety of ways. For example, a student can learn mathematical concepts by playing an instrument, listening to music, or building with clay or wood. The environment is set up so that children can observe and/or model other children, work in groups, or work individually. Encouragement, redirection, and reinforcement are primary methods of classroom management. Children's natural instinct to work cooperatively is honored. Teachers model and discuss logical thinking skills, thereby helping students develop sound decisionmaking strategies. Risk-taking is supported and encouraged; "mistakes" are seen as normal and expected steps in process-learning, and teachers work to respond in ways that preserve children's self-esteem.

All teachers at Amity know the names of all students, and teachers are always available to any student for any reason. Teachers don't take many breaks -- they want to remain accessible. At lunch they sit at a table in the main hallway (the school does not have a cafeteria) and mingle with each other and with students. During recess they are in the classrooms to spend time with students who may choose to stay inside. After school they talk to children, parents, and former students who come to visit.

Let there be no mistake -- teaching at Amity Creek is intense. At this school, there is a higher than average level of contact with all students. There is also a higher than average level of contact with other teachers. In addition to daily interaction, staff meetings at school, and ongoing teaming efforts, this small group of seven full-time staff (six teachers) and several part-time staff have a "debriefing" each week on Friday evening when they gather for dinner. It's their way of maintaining community among themselves. They realize that when they share a common philosophy, students receive a more seamless education.

Amity Creek's curriculum is characterized by abundant choices, big and small. Whether the choices are about learning arrangement (group or individually), environment (inside or outside), or topic (quilting, mosaics, or watercolors during schoolwide art centers), students are given as many choices as possible. That is not to say that the school is without formal structure. Like any school, there are many times in each classroom that students abide by the schedule and instruction determined by students and their teachers. The daily scheduling of activities, however, seeks to allow children the time they need to communicate and explore. The planning and implementation of this curriculum is made possible by flexible scheduling and daily collaboration between staff members. During the day, there are blocks of time when children are able to mix throughout the school such as at daily community time, all-school midday storytime, and before and after the official school day. Any child can express to his homeroom teacher a desire to be in another class for a special project. The staff observes how each day evolves so that they can make necessary changes to meet the children's

needs.

Within and beyond the formal requirements of the district, the children's needs and interests help drive and shape the curriculum. Instruction is presented in an integrated fashion, recognizing the connections across disciplines. As part of this integrated approach, writing and reading are taught simultaneously. Children develop an awareness of phonics through interaction with meaningful print. Literacy is the goal -- phonics is not taught in isolation. Meaningful and purposeful reading and writing are critical. Through play, movement, and language, children find many reasons to read and write. The staff encourages, supports, and facilitates more reading and writing so that meaning is always at the center.

The same thought given to reading and writing are given to mathematical concepts. Many opportunities are provided for children to discover mathematics through exploration and investigation, instead of approaching it as an isolated, abstract subject. For example, a six-year-old can build a Lego town and compare the length of certain pieces as he builds, while a 10-year old might build his own Lego town and concentrate on the scale of the model to create balance. Numeration is developed through manipulation of concrete objects and is understood before students move to formal operations. The development of logical thinking and problem solving is emphasized. The curriculum is also seen as extending beyond the cognitive realm to include attention to the social, physical, and emotional components of growth and development.

Student progress is defined in terms of individual growth and development. Daily personal observation is a critical assessment tool. Periodic written narratives and a student portfolio system provide meaningful documentation. Other appropriate assessment procedures are implemented as needed, or as mandated by the state. Students are also asked, on occasion, to provide personal reflections of where they perceive their progress to be.

Beyond academics, beyond teaching and learning, the culture of community and choice is pervasive at Amity Creek. Students -- even the youngest ones -- are given the responsibility to make sound choices for themselves. The school belongs to the children and they love to be there. They are free to move about as they wish, though an adult must always know that the children are in a safe and appropriate place. They are free to roam the halls in sock feet. They can move about in groups or pairs or alone, but never in rigid lines. They can elect to go outside for recess or stay in. They can sing and dance, write their own stories, and create as they wish. It is up to teachers to facilitate and draw connections between the world of play and the very closely related world of learning.

Parents play a critical role in every aspect of the school. It begins when they choose Amity Creek as the school for their family, and continues every day their child (or children) are there. The doors at Amity Creek are always open. Parents come and go throughout the day. Sometimes they volunteer to help teachers with specific projects, sometimes they just sit with the children during story time or class discussions. They are encouraged to participate in any capacity they desire. Parents are generally very supportive of the unique approach Amity Creek takes, even if they are a little unsure of it. On occasion, a family decides that the school isn't what they want, but that is rare. Most families find Amity Creek to be a haven for risk-taking and learning.

Not surprisingly, the approach at Amity Creek has encountered skepticism. Though the teachers knew their approach was working, and professed this with conviction at any opportunity, it was not until February 2000 that the school received validation of its efforts. Along with a few select Oregon schools, Amity Creek Elementary School was rated as exceptional by the Oregon Department of